



Justice Insights Series: Research Briefs for Policy and Practice

Do Prison Tablets Make Facilities Less Safe?

Key Takeaways

- Introducing tablets across all 12 state prisons in Washington prisons did not lead to short-term increases in total infractions, serious infractions, drug incidents, or cellphone violations.
- Point estimates consistently pointed toward reductions in misconduct—including an estimated 19.5 percent drop in total infractions and an estimated 52.6 percent drop in serious infractions—although these findings were not statistically significant, meaning that the observed reductions may have been the result of chance.
- The authors concluded that tablets can be introduced into a prison system without causing immediate harm to institutional safety and that their value for other outcomes may depend on how well they are integrated into existing programming and operations.

Why This Matters

Prison administrators face constant pressure to maintain safety while also expanding rehabilitation with fewer staff and tighter budgets. Contraband cellphones, drug use, and violent incidents remain serious threats to staff and incarcerated people alike. Tablet programs have emerged as a potential way to address several of these challenges at once by expanding access to communication, education, and entertainment, but correctional leaders have had little rigorous evidence to guide decisions regarding adopting them.

Prior research suggests that keeping incarcerated people connected to family and engaged in programming reduces misconduct. A 2017 study of digital kiosk technology in United Kingdom prisons found significant reductions in disciplinary infractions and recidivism. A study of tablet programs in New South Wales, Australia, found significant reductions in assaults but no change in order-related incidents. Separately, a jail in Pima County, Arizona, reported large drops in violence and suicide attempts after introducing tablets, although those results relied on basic descriptive data rather than a controlled evaluation.

Despite growing adoption—tablets had been deployed in at least 48 US state prison systems by 2024—rigorous causal evidence has remained scarce. This study examined whether Washington state's tablet rollout, which reached all 12 of its prisons over eight months, produced measurable short-term changes in institutional misconduct.

How the Study Worked

Researchers used monthly administrative data from the Washington Department of Corrections (WADOC) covering January 2019 through March 2023, a period that included both pre- and post-tablet program implementation months. The dataset included 12 prisons and 51 months of data for a total of 612 prison-month observations. Researchers tracked four outcomes: rates of total infractions, serious infractions (such as assaults, weapons possession, and escapes), drug incidents, and cellphone violations, all measured per 1,000 incarcerated persons. The analysis also accounted for facility-level factors that could affect misconduct, including crowding, staffing ratios, and population characteristics.

Because WADOC rolled out tablets to different facilities at different times over an eight-month window, researchers were able to compare outcomes in prisons that had just received tablets with outcomes in prisons that had not yet received them. This approach—called a “staggered adoption difference-in-differences design”—is more reliable than a simple before-and-

after comparison because it accounts for broader trends affecting all facilities at the same time, such as pandemic-era disruptions or statewide policy changes. Researchers also confirmed that the prisons receiving tablets earlier and those receiving them later were following similar trends in misconduct before tablets arrived, which supports the validity of the comparison.

What Was Learned

- **Tablets did not increase misconduct.** Across all four outcomes, the data showed no statistically significant increases in infractions, drug incidents, or cellphone violations following tablet deployment.
- **Point estimates suggested meaningful reductions.** After receiving tablets, prisons experienced average estimated reduction of 19.5 percent in total infractions, 52.6 percent in serious infractions, 32.3 percent in drug incidents, and 67.6 percent in cellphone violations. None of these estimates reached statistical significance, so they should be interpreted with caution.
- **Preexisting trends were similar across facilities.** Before tablets arrived, prisons that received them earlier and those that received them later were following comparable misconduct trends, supporting the reliability of the study's comparisons.
- **There was no consistent pattern of change after tablet adoption.** Event-study analyses, which tracked outcomes month by month around the time of tablet introduction, found no sharp or sustained shifts in any direction, suggesting tablets neither immediately improved nor worsened institutional conditions.

What This Means in Practice

Correctional administrators can introduce tablets without expecting a short-term increase in misconduct. This study provides reassurance that expanding digital access, including cheaper communication with family, entertainment, and educational resources, did not destabilize Washington state prisons during the initial rollout period. For agencies weighing whether to adopt tablet programs, the absence of adverse effects is itself a meaningful finding.

At the same time, the authors caution that tablets should not be treated as a substitute for staffing, programming, or broader institutional reforms. They note that digital access alone is unlikely to produce immediate behavioral changes in highly structured environments, and that the value of tablets likely depends on how well they are integrated into facility operations—including alignment with existing educational and therapeutic programming. The authors also note that this study captures only short-term effects; longer-term impacts and effects on outcomes like family contact and mental health remain areas for future research.

Source article

Peterson, B. E., Kim, K., Shukla, R., & Aukamp, S. (2026). Tablets behind bars: Evidence from a staggered adoption difference-in-differences study of prison misconduct. *Journal of Experimental Criminology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11292-026-09745-5>.

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